

Oscar-winning visual effects supervisor Richard Edlund talks to Lisa Dewson about making screen magic

In the field of visual and special effect, Richard Edlund has few equals.

Not only has he worked on just about every major special effects movie of the past five years, but his efforts have already rewarded him with four Oscars: for *Stars Wars*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Return Of The Jedi* and *Raiders Of The Lost Ark*. This year he's a strong contender for a fifth for his work on *Ghostbusters* and *2010* — the sequel to *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Edlund first became involved with special effects through his long-standing interest in the technical and artistic aspects of photography.

"Basically I came into it as a photographer. I like to call visual effects photography's razor edge because what we try to do is to trick people into thinking they're seeing something which they're not. It's magic in the old-fashioned Houdini sense. The problem now, is that audiences are becoming increasingly more demanding and sophisticated, and it gets harder to trick them."

According to Edlund effects can be specifically categorised. Visuals refer to photographic effects while special effects tend to be those

which are done physically in front of camera. Although film effects are now generally known as either visual or mechanical (robots, machinery, vehicles etc.), in some films mechanical effects involve little more than operating an ordinary smoke screen.

Edlund himself specialises in visual effects, but despite the scale of time, effort and money needed to create these, he maintains there's no frustration in seeing his skills take up only a fraction of screen time.

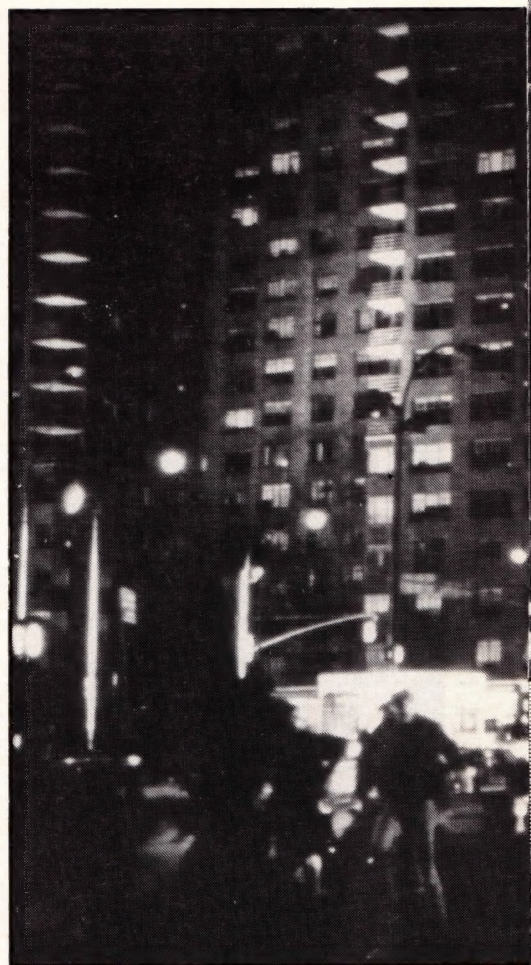
"I've thought about that a lot, but it's not really frustrating because there's no other way you can do it. How else are you gonna have a 120 foot marshmallow man walking down Broadway as we did in *Ghostbusters*? It can't be done by going out and building it all, so it's done with miniatures, tricks and various types of paintings."

"It's true I've spent an enormous amount of time on effects which have only lasted two seconds, but the scenes wouldn't have worked without them. *Poltergeist* is probably the best example of a film where every scene paid off with a visual effect. If you saw the picture without any effects, as I did when we were working on it, you'd realise how much responsibility visual effects have. If they don't work, the movie doesn't work."

At the risk of spoiling a brilliant illusion, the *Ghostbusters* marshmallow man was actually a stuntman in a suit. For the scene where the ghostbusters blow the marshmallow man up, the gooey liquid that subsequently splatters all over New York is shaving cream!

"The end sequence was a real *tour de force* for us," adds Edlund, "but let me say that if I'd had another month on the picture it would have been twice as good!"

Edlund sees *Ghostbusters* as a personal landmark not only because of the pioneering special effects, but because it was the first project for his newly formed company Boss

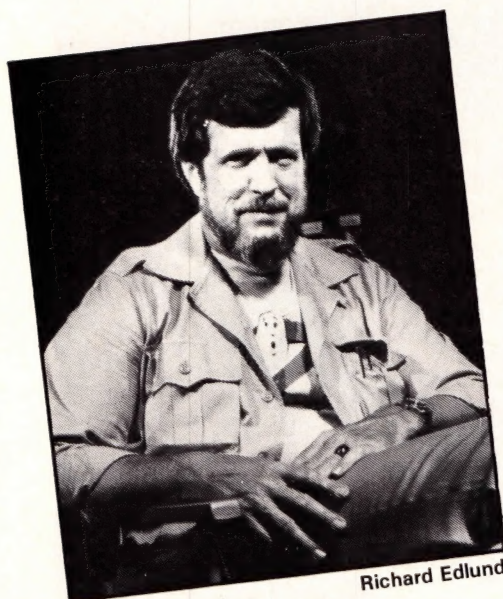


Ghostbusters: "A real favourite of mine"

Film Corporation. Occupying three buildings and encompassing 60,000 square feet, the company is staffed by a basic core of 15 people who in turn each have around 30-40 others working under them.

"What we've assembled," says Edlund "is a visual effects assembly line. The group that I work with has more experience than any other effects group in the world. Our team includes experts in optics, architecture, computers — we even have a nuclear physicist. These people all understand the art of effects. They're much more than technicians, they're artists in the broadest sense."

The studio has built a lot of its own equipment from scratch, including a new optical printer with customised lenses; a matte camera system; a massive cloud tank; a



Richard Edlund

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computerised animation stand and a special high speed camera which shoots 65mm footage which is ultimately reduced to 35mm.

"Using 65mm stock produces such a clear and pristine image," says Edlund, "that effects shots are often better in quality than the 35mm images shot during principal photography."

Edlund admits that generally it's the film he's just worked on that assumes the most importance.

"When you commit a year of your life to something it becomes very meaningful — and when it becomes successful, it's very gratifying. So *Ghostbusters* is a real favourite of mine.

"*Star Wars* will always be a landmark film because for me that was the beginning of the renaissance of special effects."

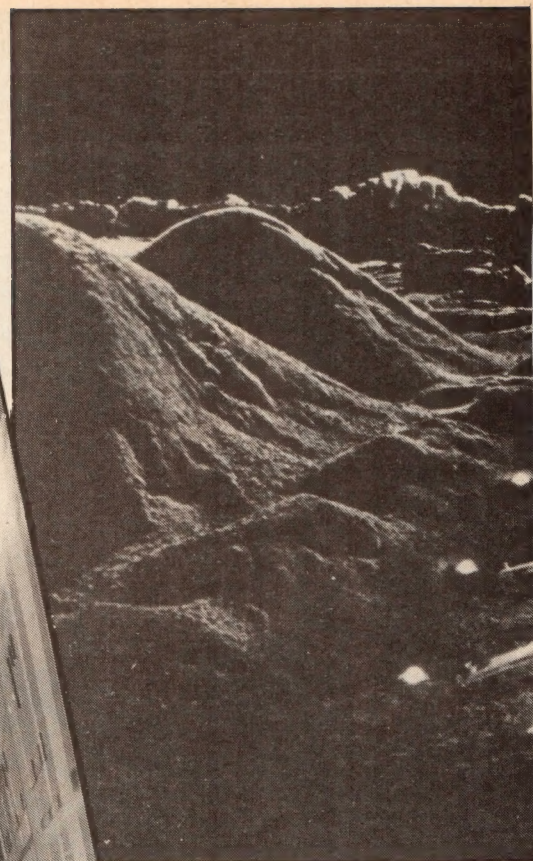


Poltergeist: "Every scene paid off with a visual effect"

SPECIAL EFFECT



Star Wars: "The beginning of the renaissance of special effects"



Renaissance is probably the right word because prior to *Star Wars* the biggest milestone in visual effects had been *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It somehow seems appropriate that the man now acknowledged as modern cinema's most accomplished effects wizard, should be responsible for the sequel to one of the most celebrated science-fiction movies of all time.

"*2010* was a very interesting assignment in a lot of ways. Firstly because *2001* is a classic — a benchmark that all of us in effects have looked at and studied. But I didn't want *2010* to look like *2001*. We've gone for a totally new look.

"The special effects were particularly challenging. While I don't think *Return Of The Jedi* will

ever be outdone in terms of sheer quantity of effects, we've had to be much more concerned with detail on *2010* because of the longer duration of our shots. Our average effects shot is eight seconds."

One of Edlund's main tasks on *2010* was to simulate and recreate special effects shots of Jupiter — constantly in the background as new dramatic events surrounding the Discovery unfold. Edlund and his effects team set about gathering information based on data assembled from the Voyager space mission. The information was then fed into a computer which supplied Edlund with several film frames from which to work.

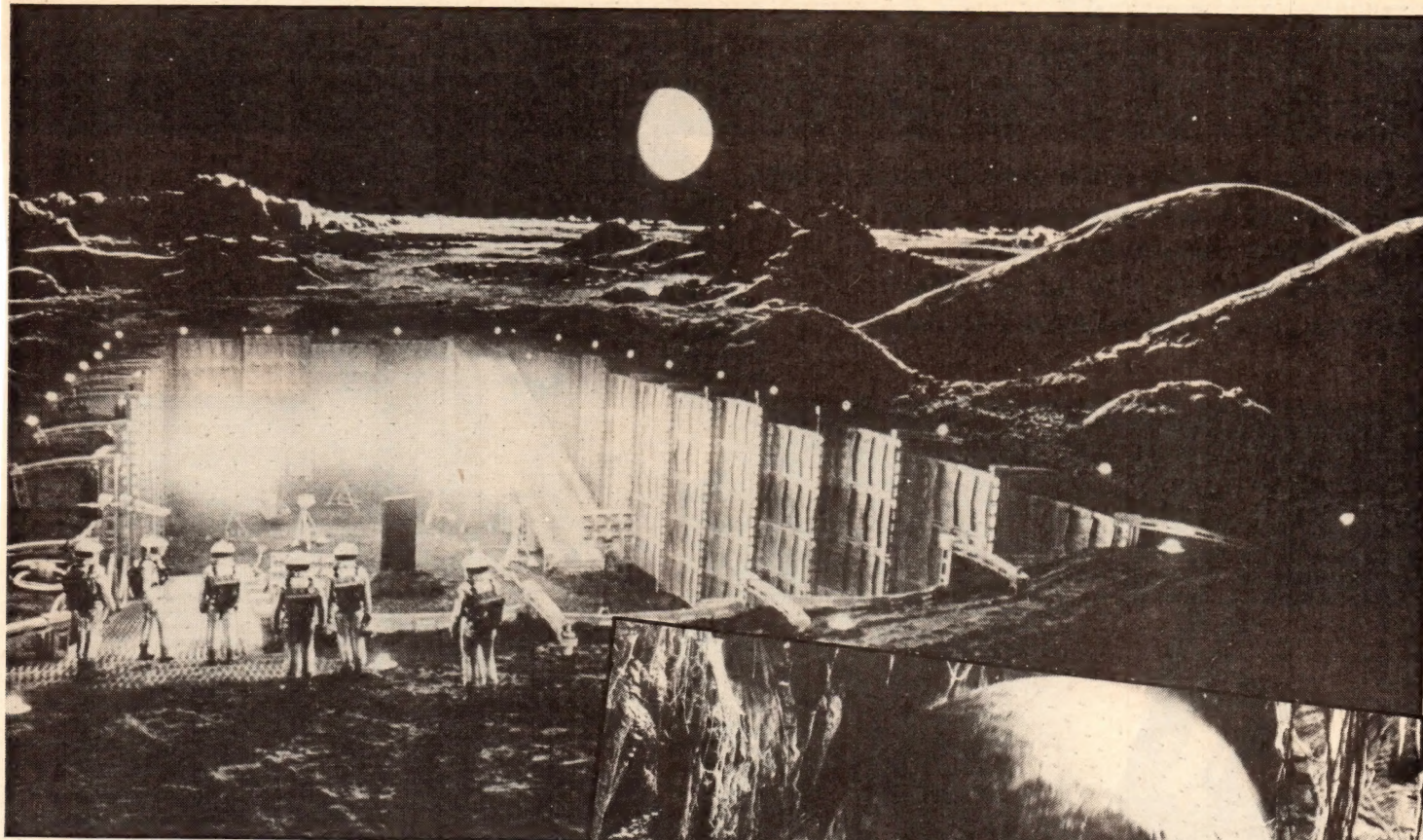
In fact computers are now widely used in visual effects, and Edlund reveals that in addition to the above, he also used Digital Scene Simulationsm — the computer

process used to provide many of the special effects for *The Last Starfighter*.

Having completed *2010*, the Boss Film Corporation is currently working on a new film called *Fright Night*. Edlund himself is in the middle of pre-production discussions on the proposed sequel to *Poltergeist*. Contrary to my suggestion that a handful of special effects films surely won't prevent cinemas from continuing to close down (at least in this country) he firmly believes that special effects will keep the movie industry bouyant.

"If anything is going to save cinemas it's going to be the great special effects pictures, because if you take films like *Star Wars* or *Ghostbusters* and put them on the small screen they look awful. You lose the spectacle. I saw *Star Wars* on TV and it looked terrible! It wasn't designed for that, and it just looks fake. Plus, at home you don't

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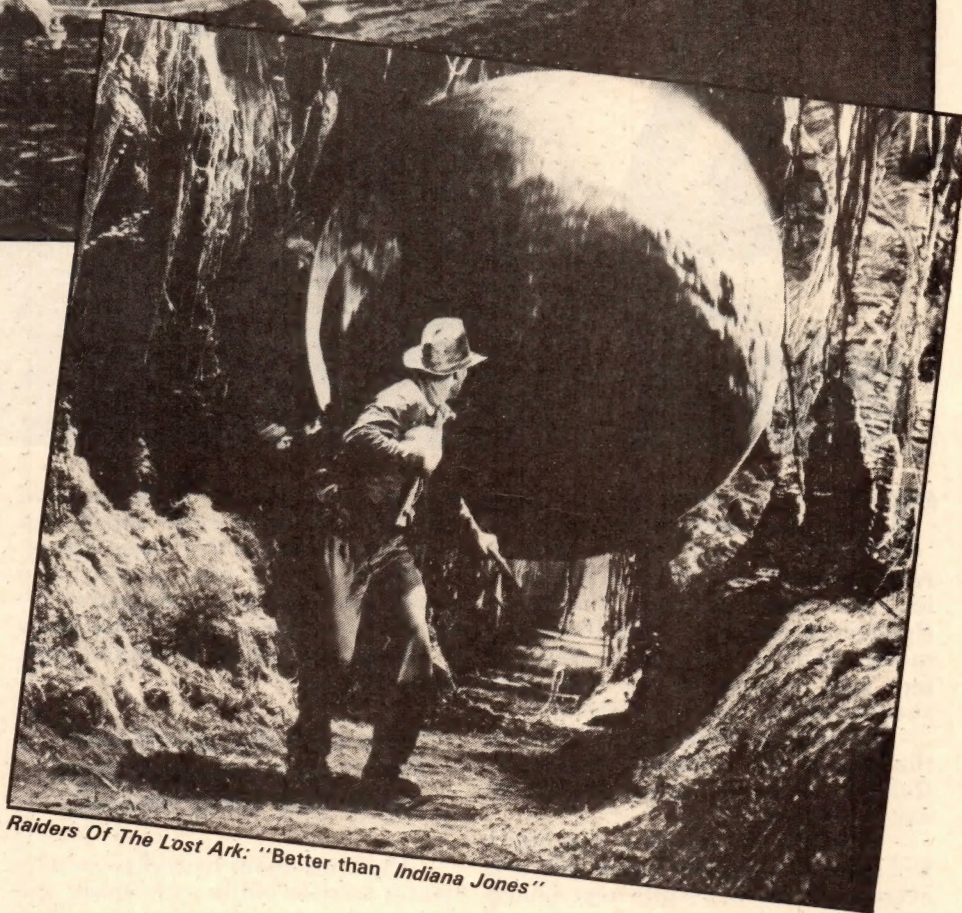
2001: A Space Odyssey: "A benchmark all of us in effects have studied"

get people hissing Darth Vader and all the things that make going to the pictures fun."

Edlund himself loves movies and admits to being a real film fan. As a kid the two films that really impressed him were *The Bicycle Thief* made by (Vittorio De Sica in 1949), and the 1950 sci-fi landmark, *Destination Moon*.

Among the effects movies he hasn't worked on, Edlund particularly admires *Blade Runner* and *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*. He says he prefers *Raiders* to *Indiana Jones And The Temple Of Doom*, but then he didn't work on the latter and only has to look at his Oscar to remind himself off the forerunner's success.

Pondering over the technological leaps and bounds made by special effects movies of recent years, as our conversation comes to a close I asked cinema's top magician if he is ever likely to run out of tricks.



Raiders Of The Lost Ark: "Better than *Indiana Jones*"

"I've often been asked if I think we're at the edge of effects, but it's like saying 'We've gone to the moon, can we go to Jupiter?' I believe that

anything which can be talked or thought about can be created in the field of visual effects. It is a limitless science."



SPECIAL EFFECTS